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Midcoast couple musical-ly inclined

By BOB KEYES, Staff Writer

Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

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INFO

FOR INFORMATION, visitnorthportmusictheater.com or call 338-8383.

It's only March, and Maine's summer theater season already is under way.

John and Ruth Gelsinger are busy preparing the inaugural campaign of the Northport Music Theater.

The husband-and-wife team plans to open the 136-seat theater in June on Route 1, on their property in Northport halfway between Lincolnville and Belfast.

The Gelsingers have been active in the Belfast Maskers, a community theater up the road, since the early 1990s. It's been their dream to contribute to the ongoing effort to restore the Belfast Opera House. But that's a major undertaking, and one likely to last several years.

The Gelsingers don't want to wait that long.

Sensing an opportunity to do something with more immediate results, the Gelsingers opted instead to open their own theater, converting what once was a 3,000-square-foot industrial shop into new performance space. They will present three shows in their first season, beginning in June and continuing through August.

Ruth Gelsinger, a piano teacher, wants to produce musicals that are different from what Maine's other summer theater companies offer.

"Our goal is to do smaller shows that are up to date. We want to present new musicals, and keep it fresh," Ruth Gelsinger said. "This is what we are not going to do -- 'Bye Bye Birdie,' 'Oklahoma!,' etc., all the old warhorses, which are being done by community theaters and high schools. We want to do other musicals that aren't being done in Maine."

For its first season, Northport Music Theater will present three quirky shows that are funny, offbeat and unique. First up, opening June 16, is "The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)," a satire that pokes fun at music-theater tradition. "Golf: The Musical" opens July 11, followed by the long-winded "6 Women with Brain Death, Or Expiring Minds Want to Know," opening Aug. 8.

The Gelsingers are not doing this on a whim. They've spent considerable time researching the summer theater communities in Maine and the entertainment options on the midcoast.

They believe they are tapping into a ripe market, and expect to make money on their theater venture.

"This is not a nonprofit organization," said John Gelsinger. "This is for profit. We're trying to make some money and pay the help."

Added his wife, "You're not supposed to make money in the arts. But the fact is, anything that is well-managed and properly planned, you should be able to do business."

According to their business plan, the Gelsingers figure they need to fill about 60 percent of their seats to break even, with tickets selling for \$20 and \$25.

Their budget for each show is about \$15,000, and they plan to pay stipends to each member of the creative team.

They will hire mostly Maine talent for their shows.

"We can do this because we are not trying to do too much," said Ruth Gelsinger. "Starting a new theater is ambitious, yes, but most of our casts are small, with just four to six people. If we are successful, and if we can actually put money aside at the end of the year, we'll go to larger shows next year. But we want to start small, and do what we feel comfortable doing."

Neither husband nor wife is a stranger to performance. Ruth Gelsinger got her master's degree in music from the University of Maine at Orono. She teaches piano and performs regularly in the midcoast.

John Gelsinger has a degree in voice and has performed most of his life.

They know what they are getting into. They view the theater as their retirement, and they think they have a reasonable, workable plan.

"This is your typical mom-and-pop music theater," Ruth Gelsinger quipped, laughing at the irony of her joke.

"But we're serious about this. We've looked this over, and we've hashed over our plans time and again. We're pleased with how things are going and excited about the future."

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